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P - Stapp, Robert
P - Jones, Carter Brooke
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- Perfect Union

Turning History Around

A MORE PERFECT UNION.
By Robert Stapp. Harper's
Magazine Press. 375 pages.
\$7.50.

Robert Stapp in this novel has turned a major aspect of American history upside down, so to speak, to form the basis of his plot. Perhaps this is no more incredible than some of the adventures projected by writers of science fiction, who have always had their devotees. The difference is that science has produced so many authentic marvels in the last century that we are willing to believe the invention of almost anything. History ... well, certain events are accepted as fact, though historians have always differed in their interpretation of them—why and how they happened.

I see no reason, though, why a fiction writer should not imagine what might have happened if Harold the Saxon had won the Battle of Hastings or if Napoleon had triumphed at Waterloo.

To return to "A More Perfect Union," if you can persuade yourself that Lincoln ordered Fort Sumter evacuated without firing a shot in 1861 and then got his cabinet and Congress to permit the Southern States to secede peacefully, you'll have no trouble going along with the rest of the story. There was, in this story, no Civil War. The Confederate States of America has been a separate government for more than a century. It abolished slavery voluntarily a few years after the threatened war of the 1860s, though Negroes remained in economic bondage and still are rarely allowed more than an eighth grade education, live in segregated areas, and have migrated north to the United States in great numbers.



ROBERT STAPP

The year is 1981. Trouble between North and South again is impending. The Confederacy, after undergoing various forms of democracy, so-called, over the years, has had imposed on it a rigid fascist government. Its president, Howie Ray Spearman, is dictator. Through a familiar process in some foreign countries, the Party of National Resurgence gradually, through recent years, has gained control. Citizens are classified according to their ability and compliance with the government. Under Spearman the South is increasingly jealous of the North's power and prestige and is furtively threatening war. The danger is the South has nuclear weapons.

Thus we find President Lander of the U.S.A. conferring on the crisis with his secretaries of state and defense and the director of the CIA. There is no doubt the U.S., with its much more powerful nuclear armament, could win. But how many lives would be lost? How can war be prevented? If, the CIA man suggests, the Spearman clique somehow could be

deposed—or disposed of—no doubt the southern dictatorship would crumble. "It would appear," the president says, after hearing fully from his three advisers in a secret strong room under the White House, "the choice lies between one life or 50 million. It is clear we must dispose of President Spearman."

But how? Leave it to the CIA, its director replies. The search for a likely assassin, intelligent and resourceful enough to act without involving the U.S. government in any way, leads to Cordell Vance. For several years he has lived as a semi-hermit in a shack in the Colorado mountains. He once was Maj. Vance, a hero in Viet Nam. But he was captured and made admissions and statements the more belligerent brass felt a soldier should not have expressed. Finally released, he faced a court of inquiry and was exonerated, but left the service with a measure of disgrace. Vance was born in the South, but at 12 his father, a radical lawyer, cast aside as "non-cooperative," smuggled the boy to friends in New York, where he could get a better education and not share his father's shame.

Vance, hesitating a long time, accepts the assignment. Meanwhile he falls in love. Naturally. But he goes ahead with his mission. The CIA smuggles him into the Confederate States and gives him an identity, even a private business. The rest is up to him.

Once you accept the bizarre premises, the story moves on to a logical enough conclusion. The narrative, however improbable, is swept along with accelerating suspense to a thrilling climax.

—CARTER BROOKE JONES